

UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Topic A: Addressing the Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant
Crisis in the Americas

Topic B: Strengthening Protection Mechanisms for Asylum
Seekers and Irregular Migrants in the Americas

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Letter From The Chair

Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the High Commission for Refugees! We are Sofía Brenes and Joaquín Izquierdo, we are thrilled to serve as your chairs for EMUN2026. Our committee is dedicated to addressing the many issues facing immigrants and refugees throughout the world. With a united commitment to advocating for human rights, we believe in the power of collaboration to delve into meaningful discussions surrounding the establishment of meaningful protections and ensuring the safety of refugees worldwide. Together, let's cultivate a dialogue that digs deep and works toward positive change.

As co-chairs, we want to highlight the significance of your voices. The strength of our committee is rooted in the diverse perspectives and backgrounds that each of your delegations brings to the table. We urge you to actively participate in our sessions, share your opinions, and contribute your insights to our discussions (keeping in mind that there is no absolute right or wrong answer!). Your engagement is key to the success of our collective efforts.

We urge you to be respectful of one another and approach the discussion with an open mind. We are very excited to view the different perspectives that each one of you has to offer. We also encourage you to have fun and enjoy the discussion, while taking respect into account at all times.

If you have any questions regarding your preparation for the committee and the conference itself, please do not hesitate to contact us. We look forward to your participation!

Sofía Lorena Brenes

Sofia-brenes@eton.edu.mx

President of UNHCR

Joaquín Izquierdo

joaquin_izquierdo@eton.edu.mx

Vice President of UNHCR

Committee Overview

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is a global organization dedicated to saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for people forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. We lead international action to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. Our vision is a world where every person forced to flee can build a better future.

Formally known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR was established by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1950 in the aftermath of the Second World War to help the millions of people who had lost their homes.

Today, UNHCR works in 137 countries. We provide life-saving assistance, including shelter, food, water and medical care for people forced to flee conflict and persecution, many of whom have nobody left to turn to. We defend their right to reach safety and help them find a place to call home so they can rebuild their lives. Long term, we work with countries to improve and monitor refugee and asylum laws and policies, ensuring human rights are upheld.

In everything we do UNHCR considers refugees and those forced to flee as partners, putting those most affected at the centre of planning and decision-making.

Recent Actions

The UNHCR is active in several areas of crisis throughout the world. Our work spans every region of the world, and attempts to facilitate, aid, and rescue refugees, migrants, and forcibly displaced people in different kinds of crisis.

Some examples of our most recent work:

1. Addressing violence in Mozambique which has displaced nearly 22,000 persons per week.
2. Facilitating the relocation of Ukrainian citizens into different European countries as a result of that

country's ongoing conflict with Russia.

3. Returning Syrians to their homes after that country's civil war and resulting regional instability.

Refugees, migrants, and forcibly displaced persons exist in all regions of the world under all sorts of different conditions. The work of the UNHCR is fundamentally to stabilize and facilitate the safe arrival of those persons to their desired destinations. Actions may range from direct assistance to people on the ground to high-level discussions between member states regarding the legal and humanitarian systems which govern these movements.

Topic A

Our committee has undertaken a variety of projects in order to deal with the difficult situation in and around Venezuela. The main actions it has taken fall under the following categories: monitoring, data, and advocacy, humanitarian assistance, and funding.

Monitoring, data & advocacy

Our committee maintains [a dedicated "Venezuela situation" page](#) summarizing displacement of Venezuelans — as of 2024, some 7.7 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants worldwide, with about 85 % (~6.6 million) in Latin America and the Caribbean. It has also [published global reports](#) sharing data on the report of the ground, [co-leads a regional coordination mechanism](#) with the International Organization for Migration.

Humanitarian Assistance

Regarding humanitarian assistance, our work mostly focuses on access to resources. Specifically, at border areas and in host communities, UNHCR [supports emergency accommodation/shelters](#), child-friendly spaces, hygiene/nutrition kits, distribution of aid to vulnerable Venezuelans. It also has been attempting to [raise awareness](#) that many Venezuelan refugees and migrants are struggling to access food, shelter, health care, education, employment.

Funding

Finally, regarding funding, the UNHCR issues humanitarian appeals/plans for the region. For example, in 2024 UNHCR required USD ≈ \$399.8 million for the Venezuela-related operation but had a significant funding gap. It uses these funds to [support operations across the region](#): in Venezuela, in host countries, and across transit routes.

Topic B

The UNHCR has been similarly focused on strengthening protection mechanism for migrants. Specifically, it works with governments in host countries to [strengthen registration systems](#), asylum/refugee frameworks, temporary protection/permitting, legal stay for Venezuelans. For example: In host countries like Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, there have been [programs to pre-register](#) or grant temporary protection/residency for Venezuelans.

In general, UNHCR's operational strategy in Venezuela (inside the country) includes objectives such as: protecting refugees/asylum-seekers, preventing statelessness, facilitating sustainable reintegration of returnees, and mitigating displacement risks.



Background of the Topic

In order to have a complete understanding of why migrants are so willing to undertake a journey which almost always ends in a negative outcome of some kind, however, it is necessary to understand both the reasons why migrants decide to make the journey in the first place and the risks they face along the way. In other words, “human mobility is rooted in larger structural forces and historical processes that systematically weaken the ability of people to live in their home communities with safety and justice (Vogt 2013).” People face significant threats to their physical well-being, political rights, and ability to make a life when they do not have sufficient resources to handle living a normal life and deal with the social, political, and economic realities of their situations. When this is the case, people are said to be living in a state of “social vulnerability.” People attempt to adapt to these circumstances by mitigating the harm inherent in their circumstances or by removing themselves from those circumstances altogether. One way to do so is by immigrating to another place so as to remove oneself from harmful situations which cause social vulnerability (Riosmena and Jochem 2012).

The reasons a would-be migrant might decide to undergo the migration process are divided into two kinds: push factors and pull factors. Push factors generally refer to negative features of a sending country which motivate a would-be migrant to leave and pull factors generally refer to positive features,

or the hope of positive features, within a receiving country which inspire them to attempt the journey. These factors spring from one or more of many dimensions of the experience of living in a place, be they social, political, or economic. Migrants and scholars of the immigration process frequently cite low wages and insufficient formal-sector employment, poor investment opportunities, and inadequate access to credit, finance, and insurance systems as a popular push factor of immigration, as in addition to the user-end economic difficulties, these factors are often symptoms of a larger economic system which is unable to provide the traditional markets, community relationships, and basic capital which would keep a person from wanting to leave an area. Economic factors are not the only ones which motivate would-be migrants to leave their homes, however, and those social and political factors such as authoritarian or corrupt governments, wars, and natural disasters can be equally important reasons that people emigrate, and “have played a significant role in the first waves of Central American migration to the United States (Rosenblum and Brick 2011);” this is particularly true for Central American countries El Salvador, where transnational circulations of migrants and deported gang members and zero-tolerance policing strategies are embedded within a longer legacy of U.S. involvement in the region (Brian and Loczko 47, Zilberg 2011, Vogt 2013). Pull factors naturally mirror push factors in that they provide (or give the appearance of providing) the resources and opportunities that are missing in would-be migrant’s country of origin. Chief among these factors are the availability of jobs and associated economic opportunities for immigrants and their families. Though these jobs are what immigration scholars refer to as “3-D jobs” -- dirty, difficult, and dangerous -- the promise of regular paid work creates a sense of opportunity. including safety, limited government, and equality before the law. Additionally, would-be migrants are attracted to the prospect of stable government, the rule of law, and the political and human rights often not present in their countries of origin.

People migrate (oftentimes temporarily) in order to find better circumstances that allow them to alleviate the worst effects of social vulnerability in the short term or remedy them in the long run, not the least by allowing them to live in more secure, stable, and salubrious environments. Despite the potential for immigration to produce positive outcomes in terms of alleviating this social vulnerability, it also has a strong potential to bring about even more insecurity. There are a multitude of risks along the immigration journey which might produce these situations of insecurity; some of these are inherent to

the immigration process and some of them are specific to the geographical zones which migrants attempt to pass through.

One important feature to mention is immigrants' vulnerability due to their unique position of transit and their value to extra-legal groups. This risk comes from two different groups: the authorities and those extra-legal groups such as smugglers and cartels. As unauthorized, being caught by border guards or other state officials may result in migrants being detained or deported, subjected to violence perpetrated by these officials, forced overboard by smugglers in fear of being caught, or being pushed back. Given the need to avoid detection, migrants need to move as clandestinely as possible, often bringing them to the most dangerous parts of their modes of transportation. These places may include underneath trucks, where they face a danger of falling among moving vehicles; wheelbases of planes, where migrants are at risk of freezing to death, suffocating, or falling; sealed containers on cargo ships, where there's a danger of suffocation; and engine rooms or propeller bays of ships, where migrants are at risk due to machinery and or suffocation (Brian and Laczko 90, Vogt 2013).

Another important dimension of immigrant vulnerability is the violence they experience. This violence comes in all forms but kidnapping, smuggling, and extortion are particularly hazardous features of the immigration experience, with migrants and other people in transit experiencing fear, violence, and concern for their safety as extra-legal groups target them for their labor, bodies, or organs. Worse yet, these systems of exploitation are often abetted by authorities: "laws and policies that govern unauthorized migration from a perspective of national security rather than human rights coproduce vulnerability and violence (Brian and Laczko 16). Such "legal violence" (Menjivar and Abrego 2012) funnels migrants into dangerous and clandestine routes, making the "presence of absent people" more valuable in licit and illicit economic contexts (Vogt 2013).

Context of the Problem Worldwide

While refugees, migrants, and forcibly displaced persons exist in all kinds of contexts where conditions vary, there are two recent cases which stand out as being particularly representative: North Africa-Europe and Central America-North America.

North Africa-Europe

While some risks, like those described above, are simply inherent to the immigration process, each context also carries its own unique set of risks and challenges. Broadly, these fall into two categories: the elements and direct violence (Vogt 2013). While both contexts certainly have these two categories of risks, the difference in their applications is so dramatic as to merit a mention. In the European context, for example, the routes migrants take almost always include a trip over the Mediterranean; for that reason, water-related risks are prevalent in Europe and not nearly as present in the North American context. Immigration scholars Tara Brian and Frank Laczko describe these risks at length, detailing the variety of hazards migrants face on their journey:

Migrant boats are at greater risk of losing direction or running out of supplies or food or, more devastatingly, drinking water. Often every space on a boat used to carry unauthorized migrants is reserved for additional paying passengers rights rather than food, water, or fuel. These boats are more likely to get lost as they may be operated by inexperienced captains with little to no navigation equipment on board. Migrant boats seem to be a very low quality, increasingly so since the likelihood of confiscation has increased with stricter surveillance. Since the boat will presumably be lost, smugglers have an incentive to invest as little as possible in the boat itself. Those who cross from West Africa to the Canary Islands, quite easily miss the mark and drift out into the Atlantic. Migrants are also at a greater risk of shipwreck and capsizing due to overcrowding, an experienced crew and captain, substandard quality of the boats, which means that leaks and motor failure occur frequently (Brian and Laczko 91).

Despite the prevalence of travel by sea, some migrants also do attempt to cross by land. Those attempts bring a different slate of risks: for those who cross the land borders between Morocco and in the Spanish enclaves in Ceuta and Melilla, the dangers are from the razor-wire fences as well as violence from the Moroccan Police and “pushbacks” by the Spanish Guardia Civil. The land border between Greece and Turkey is mostly marked by a deep and fast flowing river. This border region was also the site of thousands of unexploded landmines until 2009 and has vast areas of dense forest in which it is easy to become lost, and let's face the dangers of starvation, dehydration, and hypothermia (Brian and Laczko 90). Be it by land or by sea, migrants take on an extraordinary set of risks when attempting to cross into Europe; unfortunately, many succumb to those challenges.

Central America-North America

Migration routes in the North American context also come with their own risks related to the elements and to direct violence. Similar in consequence but unique in context, migrants face a multitude of environmental hazards in their trip northwards:

Migrants face a number of deadly risks when crossing the United States-Mexico border. They drown in irrigation canals and rivers; they die in motor vehicle accidents or struck by vehicles as they attempt to cross busy highways on foot; they follow their deaths from mountain cliffs, and they freeze to death in the mountains of Arizona and California. The vast majority of migrants who died on the US side of the border with Mexico perish from heat stroke and dehydration in the deserts of the Southwest. (Vogt 2013)

Though they come from the same source as I will discuss in more detail further below, these environmental hazards are unfortunately only one set of problems amongst many. The journey through the interior of Mexico to the United States, for example, is one marked by a range of hazards, chief among them organized crime. Kidnappers who specifically target migrants due to their vulnerable status and violence from drug cartels are particularly problematic. Given their non-legal status and their general vulnerability for all the reasons described in previous sections of this paper, migrants are easy targets for kidnappers who seek to exploit migrants' bodies, organs, and relatives for cash. A study conducted in 2009 by the Mexican National Human Rights Commission reported that nearly 10,000 people had been victims of kidnapping, most of them Central American migrants, over a period of six months (Staff 2009). To avoid these kidnappers, migrants are often forced to contract the services of a smuggler for a hefty fee, often upwards of \$6,000-\$8,000. Those who do not face down disappearance or death. Engaging with these smugglers naturally brings about its own share of risks from unequal power relationships to betrayal and being left to die. Stories circulate among migrants of others who were taken, having their bodies opened up on makeshift tables in hotel rooms and their organs extracted. This is only one particularly gruesome example of migrants becoming valuable commodities to be exchanged for handsome ransoms or to have their bodies or body parts sold, trafficked, or discarded (Brian and Lazcko

16 and 48; Vogt 2013).

Though danger of this kind has always been present in the area, circumstances have been made worse by a series of government policies both related and unrelated to immigration. Chief among these policies are those initiated by former Mexican President Felipe Calderon in his attempt to counter narco violence in the country's interior. Though his administration claimed to have increased citizen security throughout the region, the data shows otherwise. Data from the region between 2006 and 2013, the period directly after the implementation of Calderon's policies, shows between 60,000 and 100,000 people killed and over 26,000 disappeared (Staff 2009). Apart from the obvious humanitarian horror brought on by these numbers, Calderon's policies brought about a context of what scholars call "low-intensity conflicts" or "new wars" in which the distinctions between armed conflict, organized crime, and large-scale human rights violations are blurred (Kaldor 2006). This phenomenon is made worse by another shift within Mexican authorities, that which political scientist Peter Andreas calls "narco-corruption," in which authorities profit from increased militarization of drug policies by involving themselves with the exact groups they are supposed to be fighting (Andreas 1998). Although the difference in the risks migrants face in Mexico versus the United States are complex, they can be summarized as follows: migrants face structural violence when crossing to the United States, and they face direct violence in Mexico. Structural violence, a term coined by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, refers to social, legal, or otherwise structured processes that lead to disproportionate levels of risk for some, often while protecting others (Galtung and Höivik 1971).

Questions To Consider

1. How can member states in the Americas address the structural "push factors" (such as poverty, corruption, and insecurity) that drive social vulnerability and forced migration without overstepping national sovereignty?
2. What balance should be struck between national border enforcement policies and the protection of migrants' human rights, given the prevalence of "legal violence" and extrajudicial abuse during transit?

3. How can regional organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), in coordination with UNHCR and IOM, improve cooperation on asylum processing, protection, and information sharing across borders?
4. In what ways can governments in migrant transit countries (particularly Mexico and Central American states) reduce violence and corruption among authorities and criminal networks that prey upon migrants?
5. What policies can be implemented to ensure migrants and refugees are not only safely relocated but also meaningfully integrated into host societies through access to employment, education, and healthcare?



Members

- Argentine Republic
- Commonwealth of The Bahamas
- Belize
- Federative Republic of Brazil
- Canada
- Republic of Colombia
- Republic of Costa Rica
- Republic of Cuba
- Dominican Republic
- Republic of Ecuador
- Republic of El Salvador
- Republic of Guatemala
- Republic of Haiti
- Republic of Honduras
- Jamaica
- United Mexican States
- Republic of Nicaragua
- Organization of American States (Observer)
- Republic of Panama
- Oriental Republic of Uruguay
- United States of America
- Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Key Terms

1. Push factors
2. Pull factors
3. Structural violence

4. Legal violence
5. 3-D jobs
6. Pushbacks

Recommended Reading

UNHCR & IOM – Refugee and Migrant Response Plan for Venezuelans (RMRP) 2024

Comprehensive report on the regional response to the Venezuelan crisis, covering protection, health, and integration.

<https://www.r4v.info/en>

Organization of American States – “Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS)”

Details cooperation among Latin American states, coordinated with UNHCR.

<https://www.mirps-honduras.org/en/>

Vogt, Wendy A. *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey*. (2018)

Ethnographic study of Central American migrants through Mexico — core to understanding “legal violence.”

BBC News – “Venezuelan Migration Crisis Explained” (2024)

Clear overview of one of the largest displacement crises in the region.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56943685>

Key Policy Frameworks

Global Compact on Refugees (2018)

Outlines principles for shared international responsibility in refugee protection.

<https://www.unhcr.org/global-compact-refugees>

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